

**Delightfully Twisted Tales**

# Wisps, Spells and Faerie Tales

Volume Four



**Nicky Drayden**

DELIGHTFULLY TWISTED TALES:  
VOLUME FOUR  
WISPS, SPELLS AND FAERIE TALES

by  
Nicky Drayden

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## LOW-CARB CHEESECAKE

BY NICKY DRAYDEN

First Published by Drabblecast, 2008

Microscopic explosions danced across my taste buds. I closed my eyes to savor the delectable flavors. This couldn't be right. There was no way this cheesecake could be low-carb as the menu had advertised. I flagged my waiter over, shoving a last innocent forkful into my mouth before I faced the truth and ensuing pounds.

"Yes, ma'am? Is the cheesecake to your liking?"

"Very much so," I said, patting my cloth napkin at my mouth. "In fact, I think you must have accidentally given me the regular version instead."

"I'm afraid that is impossible," he said, carefully annunciating as if his words were as delicate as lace. "This is our signature cheesecake. The only one we serve."

The joyous expression that crossed my face must have been a startling one, since the waiter suddenly looked overcome with worry.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, fine." I glanced around the restaurant, noting how thin everyone seemed to be, and how they were blissfully shoveling bite after bite of cobblers, cakes, and pies down their throats. Perhaps I should've dared to have more than the mixed greens salad for dinner, but it wasn't too late to indulge. I looked up bashfully at the waiter and said, "Could I get another slice, please?"

"Of course. I'll have that right out to you. And will that be all?"

"Just one thing," I said, nodding towards the cheesecake. "How do you do it?"

"I'm not allowed to say, miss. It's a family recipe."

"Oh, I see," I said, stroking my purse with an exaggerated motion, trying to imply there'd be a big tip involved if he spilled it.

He shot a series of nervous looks around the place, then pulled a rag from his apron. As he pretended to wipe a mess up from the table, he leaned in close to me and said, "Pixie dust."

"Pixie dust!" I said, and he immediately shushed me.

"It's sweeter than sugar with a fourth of the calories. The owners brought the recipe with them from the old country." He eyed my purse, the polish in his voice replaced with that of street sensibilities. "I hope you know I could lose my job for telling you this."

"I hear the going rate for tips on secret recipes is at two hundred percent these days."

The waiter looked satisfied with my offer. After all, what was forty bucks compared to a lifetime free from dieting and exercise? I took another forkful, closely examining my dessert. I could see the sparkles glistening under the artificial light of the restaurant. Perhaps I could take a trip to the old country to find pixies of my own. I imagined myself in my kitchen, my new tiny companions flapping their delicate wings as they hovered above my mixing bowl. Then we'd all laugh as they cast plumes of their magic sweetness into my favorite recipes.

I saw the waiter coming with my second piece, so I popped the last morsel into my mouth, but as I chewed, I crunched down onto something hard. I discretely spat the offending bit into my napkin, then looked at it in horror.

"Waiter, what is this?" I asked, holding up the napkin for him to see. Clearly it was a tiny glass slipper, no bigger than the nail on my pinky finger.

"Oh," he said. "Sorry about that. The blades on the blender must need sharpening."

"You mean..." I swallowed back the lump in my throat and ignored the sloshing in the pit of my stomach. "Are you telling me that I just ate a pixie?"

"Not a whole one. Just a couple of them – five seconds on chop, fifteen on puree – is enough to make three cheesecakes, easily." There it was, that concern on his face again, this time more grave. "Are you all right, ma'am? Can I get you a glass of milk?"

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**WIZARD FIGHT ON SIXTH STREET  
BY NICKY DRAYDEN**

First Published by Kaleidotrope, 2009

Two wizards approach in the night  
Eyes ablaze.  
Dos Equis on their breath  
Neon lights set the stage.  
Wands drawn,  
Widened stances,  
A battle over turf.  
Pimps and hookers cross the road  
To give them ample berth.

~

Words are slurred in a cryptic tongue,  
Mystic energies depart.  
Twin bolts ignite virgin sky  
Like molten works of art.  
Spectators stop,  
Beats slow,  
Bouncers crane to see the fight.  
Heaven's seams burst to bits  
Spilling silver streaks of light.

~

Screams tread in the moistened air.  
Waning moon eclipsed.  
Mackerel rains down by the ton  
Conjured from drunken lisps.  
Fins flap,  
A futile gesture.  
Sterling tides begin to swell.  
Proving yet again why wizards  
Should never drink and spell.

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**UP IN SMOKE**  
**BY NICKY DRAYDEN**

First Published by Cabinet Des Fées, 2010

"Evan, you'll give your brother nightmares," Mama rasps. Slumped in her vinyl chair, she barely has energy to scold me for smoking in her kitchen.

Dewey beats his chubby hands on the tray of his highchair, pulverizing steamed carrots. Yeah, he's still on solids. The brat can't talk yet either, but he idolizes how I can dissipate into thin air, dine on a gentle breeze, look for love in a storm cloud, then slip under tattered weather-stripping and into bed before Mama ever suspects.

I grow smoky tendrils behind Mama's back like giant bunny ears. Dewey laughs, spitting up carrot mash, and for a brief second his arms become gray wisps reaching towards me. Mama sighs and pats him on the back, too many sleepless nights to notice.

Smoking this young, Mama's gonna be pissed. But for now it'll be me and Dewey's little secret.

Tonight we'll seep through a cracked window in his nursery and I'll teach him to surf the auroras, hitch a ride on the doldrums, and court mischief 'til we hit the stratosphere. Cloud chicks dig babies, I hear. I might like being a big brother after all.

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## **JACK AND THE STEAMSTALK**

### **BY NICKY DRAYDEN**

My boy Jack and me are down in the Everglen pulling wings off of fairies when he says to me, he says, "Hey, Gannon, wanna see something real special?" Of course I say yeah, because last time Jack had something real special to show me, it was an enormous curly brown pube hair – thick as a fire hose and nearly as long once we'd stretched it out. It'd fallen from the sky and belonged to that giant living way up in the clouds, right above where the Everglen is.

Yeah, we're not supposed to be here. The Everglen is "off limits," like my mama always tells me in that squeaky voice of hers. But I can't stand staring at concrete all day without a tree in sight, back in the city where the fairies have all got pissy attitudes and street smarts up to here, so it's no use trying to sneak up on them so we can pluck 'em.

So anyways, Jack leads us down deep into the Everglen, over the tangled knots of tree roots and through dense brush, further in than I've ever been. Everything smells fresh as toilet cleaner out here, all piney and junk. Thorny vines nick at our pant legs, and innocent-looking mud puddles lie in wait for our slightest misstep. Jack does a good job guiding us around the danger, but as soon as I start feeling comfortable, a giant crescent slices through the canopy and trenches itself into the ground, right between me and Jack.

It's like the moon's fallen from the sky, white and translucent. I press my hand up against the crescent and feel the ridges. I can barely make Jack out on the other side, doing the exact same thing.

"Toenail clipping, right foot, big toe," Jack says in that way that makes him sound like an expert on all things giant.

I join Jack in a hurry. A second earlier or later, one of us would have gotten pruned for sure. "Maybe we should go back," I say. Not that I'm scared or anything, mind you, but I promised Kaz I'd stop by her place to help her tidy up. And by tidy up, I mean waxing her unibrow, which trust me, is a two person job. But she's the prettiest troll in the eighth grade, which maybe ain't saying much, but she's my girl either way.

"It won't take long," Jack says back. "Promise." And then he starts running, and I follow behind, keeping one eye on the path ahead and

another towards the treetops in case anything else tries to split me in two. It gets darker, light barely breaks through, and the noises of fairies and birds and insects become less like songs and more like shrieks and howls and cusses.

And then I see it, a graveyard of gears and broken panes of glass half-buried in the moist ground. The vines are already trying to swallow them, shatter the gears into a million pieces, then turn them into dirt. In a day or two, you'd never even know they'd been here at all.

Pixies are real particular about their surroundings. They don't like foreign objects littering up their woods, or foreign people for that matter. But you never see them, other than maybe a glimmer caught from the corner of your eye if you're lucky. Jack says he doesn't trust them because they're cowardly and lazy and make the forest do their dirty work for them, but I know that's not true. My MumMum's a pixie, and she's probably the most adventuresome person I know, and she liked foreign people enough to marry my Elven grandfather.

"So is this real special, or what?" Jack asks, stroking one of the gears. "It's a pocket watch. Or rather it was."

"It's something," I say. "Why do you suppose the giant tossed it?"

Jack shrugs. "Maybe it was broken. Anyway, it's ours now."

I laugh. Maybe Jack didn't notice, but most of those gears are bigger than us. No way we're moving that thing anywhere. Jack turns and stares me down with a bent brow and tells me that he's got this great idea on how to build another of his robominations and that it'll make us some serious cash. Sounds good, right? But last time Jack had a great idea, one of us ended up getting six stitches, the other got his stomach pumped, and neither one of us could look at a vacuum cleaner or a dish soap bottle for a good, long while without getting all queasy.

So I listen, doing my best not to roll my eyes. It's what friends do, right? Entertain each other's delusions? He asks if I'll help, practically begs me, and I tell him, "Whatever, as long as we split the profits fifty-fifty," and he says, "Sure, but you'll have to pay Kaz out of your half." Then I realize it's not me he needs. It's my girl's biceps. Yeah, she could heft a gear on each shoulder without chipping her nail polish.

Don't drool. She's all mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You know, you could at least pretend to help," Kaz says, lugging fifty feet of rubber tarp under her arm, three ten-gallon water jugs strapped to her back like a pack mule. Yeah right, me and my wispy arms, with the upper body strength of a wet paper bag. She frowns, even more menacing than usual with the bristle from her unibrow showing, but who has time to wax when we're on the verge of being millionaires? Not that Jack lets us in on the purpose of his secret robomination. He just sits out in the middle of the forest, making us fetch scrap from all over the city while he constructs his latest monstrosity. Usually Jack means well, and he kicks ass at turning old junk into spectacular inventions. But sometimes Jack gets his mind set on something and there's no talking him down until halfway through the ambulance ride to the E.R.

It's all changed, the Everglen, even from a couple hours ago, which means the pixies are angry with Jack's plan. Can't say I blame them. The whole city used to be forest, way before the developers came and paved everything over, putting up condos and coffee shops on every corner. That was way before my time, back when MumMum was about my age.

I try to remember them silly ancestral songs she taught me when I was just a whelp. She'd purr the ancient lyrics while fluttering her wings so fast they trilled like a soprano with a helium habit. I hum the tune, a few words coming back to me here and there, and I hope it's enough to calm these pixies. The pathway thins a smidgeon, vines pulling back like anxious serpents, but then Kaz yells, "What are you humming?" and I grit my teeth and shake my head and ignore the awkward tug between my shoulder blades.

"Damn pixies," Kaz growls as a vine swirls up and around her ankle. She kicks it off and trudges down to where Jack's building his robomination. Kaz doesn't know I'm one-forth pixie. That's not exactly the kind of thing you go around telling just anyone. Not even Jack knows, and we've been best buds since we were dirtying up diapers. Oh, I've wanted to tell him a thousand times, but I've seen that look in his eyes when we pluck fairies – not just boyhood mischievousness, but jealousy and hatred and all those things you want to pretend aren't in your best friend's heart.

Kaz throws the tarp down at Jack's feet, then crosses her arms over her expansive chest. "Jack, if you don't tell me why you've got me dumpster

diving for this crap," Kaz snarls, "I swear I'm going to pound you into the dirt with this fist."

Jack snickers, unsure if she's joking or not. She's not.

"You'd better tell us," I say to Jack. "You know you're my boy, but if I've gotta pick sides, Kaz wins hands down."

"Fine. I'm nearly done anyway," he says, dragging the tarp towards the skeleton of the robomination – gears, piping, wire, and a vast pile of other scrap put together with an enormous spool-like thing towards the bottom, and something that resembles a giant hair crimper sticking out from the top. Jack nods at Kaz to dump the last of the water into a fifty-gallon drum, then he takes after the tarp with a pair of shears, snipping it just so until it fits snugly around the spool. "This machine is going to take us to the heavens!"

I frown. "Not literally, right? It's just that after what happened with your last robomination ..."

"Invention!" Jack shrieks. He hates my word for his freaky little projects. "I could have gotten it to work if I'd had the proper resources. That's why it's so important that this one succeed. I'll be so rich, I'll never have to build with scrap again! Just think of the possibilities!"

"Do I have to?" I groan.

"Look. The plan is simple. We've already ticked off those shifty pixies, so it'll only be a matter of time before they sic the vines after the steamstalk–"

"The what?" Kaz asks.

"The steamstalk. This invention. Pay attention," Jack says.

Kaz slits her eyes.

I put my hand on her arm to calm her. Her gray-green skin is thick, but soft as the finest leather. Get her riled up though, and she'll turn to stone on your ass, which maybe comes in handy dealing with bullies and door-to-door salesman, but I sorta like having my best friend all in one piece. "You mentioned riches," I say to Jack to get this conversation back on target. "How's that going to make us cash?"

"Well, what's the one thing you know about giants?" Jack asks.

"Um ... they're really big?"

"Right! Everything's big up there, which means big treasure! Just a couple of gold coins would set us for life!"

"You mean you want us to sneak up to the giant and steal his treasure?" I try to keep the terror out of my voice. "Isn't that, like, illegal?"

"The giant won't miss it. He's got tons of treasure, right? It'd be like swiping a few bucks from your ma's purse."

"Only my ma's not as tall as a mountain range and wouldn't eat me if I got caught."

Jack looks flustered for a moment, then shakes his head as if my logic obviously isn't good enough. "Gold, Gannon! And we won't get caught. We can't get caught. We'll be no bigger than fairies to him."

The same fairies we were pulling wings off of a day ago? Perfect. But I keep my lips pressed together, and keep entertaining his delusion. After all, there's no way this robomination is going to do anything, besides maybe explode.

"Did you hear that? Gold!" says Kaz, her dark eyes sparking like struck flint. She sweeps me up tight in her arms, swinging me side to side like a doll baby. "Oh, Gannie, let's just take a quick peek up there. You're not scared, are you?"

I don't want to look like a chump in front of my girl, so I pull myself from the cling of her rocky cleavage and man-up. "I'm not scared. Do I look scared?"

"A little," says Jack.

"Just get your steamstalk working already, and I'll be the first one up!"

Jack lights a match, then crawls under the robomination and sets some enchanted wood ablaze. That stuff burns long and hot, and in no time steam starts leaking from the loose joints of the robomination's pipes. The gears grind, slowly at first, but then build up enough momentum to start the giant spool churning. That's all this machine is doing, though – churning, churning, with the crimpers at the top flopping back and forth like drunken sock puppets.

I breathe a sigh of relief, feeling like a million bucks. I get to be the supportive best friend and the daring boyfriend, all without stepping an inch off the ground. "Hey, maybe next time," I say to Jack, but then I see it – a long vine crawling up towards the robomination's spool. It gets caught on one of the gear teeth.

"It's working!" Jack screams.

Another vine latches on, then another. They grow aggressively, trying to devour the robomination, but Jack's figured out a way to use the forest

against itself. In no time, the spool is full, and out the top come the ends of the vines. They go through the crimper and get braided together to form one massive stalk. The robomination works double time to keep from being swallowed up into the forest.

"We'd better hitch a ride while we can," Jack says.

I'm pushed from behind. "You first, hero," Kaz says to me. She bats her eyes, blows me a kiss. Oh, what I'll do for that girl.

I mind my step as I climb up the spooled vines, then make my way up to the steamstalk itself. It's growing a foot a second now, so thick all three of us holding hands couldn't get all the way around it. I clench my jaw and look at Jack and Kaz. They both nod back to me. Then I face my fear. I jump, latch on, and dig my arms and legs in tight.

I'm thrust up so fast I have to close my eyes. I hear Kaz scream, "Here goes nothing!" then Jack say, "Treasure, here we come!" We ride for twenty minutes before the steamstalk grinds to a halt.

"We'll have to climb from here," Jack says, his words chilling me worse than the cold breeze.

The city and Everglen are spread out beneath us – a monstrous gray ring of stone buildings webbed with asphalt roads surrounding a lush island of greenery. Kaz and Jack are making up the distance. I start climbing, holding on to each breath of thin air. As we near the clouds, the temperature drops sharply, and soon we're blinded by whiteness. I struggle to find hand and footholds, grabbing carefully, knowing one false step will send me plummeting.

At last the clouds part, and I step onto the billowing surface. It's spongy, but I learn to walk like I'm stepping on cotton candy. A little pressure and it stiffens beneath my feet, too much and my foot sinks straight through.

Squinting through the harshest of sunlight, I see a ginormous fortress before me. Well, maybe not a fortress – more like an old, crusty shack that looks like it's a hard sneeze from crumbling to bits, but hell, it is ginormous, higher than the Bellview Towers and as wide as ten city blocks.

"Is it everything we imagined?" Jack asks as Kaz yanks him onto the clouds.

"Not quite," I say. From the looks of things, this giant hasn't got two pennies to rub together, much less any sort of gold. Jack seems undaunted and marches soundlessly right up to the expanse of weathered wood panels. They're buckling and cracking so bad that we're able to see right into the

house. It's disorienting. I lose my balance as my eyes take in the view from a rat's perspective. A vast desert of warped wood planks stretches out in all directions with gaps as wide as Kaz's mother's ass ... not that I've been looking. But really, it's just a one room hovel: a cot, a table and a couple beat-up chairs, a wood stove with a frying pan hanging overtop, and rumpled clothes tossed about a sitting area.

"I don't see any riches," I whisper, though there's no giant in sight, and even if there were, I doubt he'd hear us.

"Oh, there's riches," Jack bellows. "We just have to try harder to find them."

"There," says Kaz. "Over to the right, underneath the bench."

Jack pushes us out of the way to get a better look. "It's a goose," he grumbles.

"You never heard of the goose that lays golden eggs?" Kaz asks. "Sheeze, for a couple of treasure chasers, you certainly don't know much at all about giants." Kaz shakes her head, then steps inside. Jack and me scramble after her. I try not to breathe through my nose. It smells like dirty drawers in here.

We're small enough to walk right through the wire mesh of the sleeping goose's cage, then we climb our way up to the top of her straw nest, careful not to disturb her. Last thing we need is to become some goose's mid-afternoon snack.

"I'm going in," says Jack, staring up at twenty feet of feathered goose ass. "If she's sitting on something, I'm going to find it. Kaz, you see if you can break through a few of those links so we can roll the egg straight out of here."

Kaz nods and starts snapping the cage wire with her bare hands.

"And what do you want me to do?" I ask, suddenly feeling as useless as tits on a tumbleweed.

"Watch for the giant." And like that, Jack disappears into a jungle of white and brown feathers.

It's unnervingly quiet. My head swivels in each direction, my senses on edge. Did I just hear something? Shadows loom like seas. I can't stop shivering, and all my thoughts are about getting my skinny ass out of here, and to hell with Jack and his treasure. Why should I pretend to be brave when I'm not? It's in my blood after all, right? Just another skittish pixie, too afraid to face the world. Just as I'm about to make a run for it, Jack

squirms back out covered in liquid gold. My heart flips so hard it skips a beat, but then I notice that it's yolk covering Jack, and lots of it.

"They're just regular eggs." Jack sulks and wipes yolk from his face. "Through and through. Every single one of them."

The goose stirs, then lets out a thunderous squawk as it cocks its head in our direction.

"Let's get out of here," I say, and Kaz is right behind me, nodding in agreement. We're all the way back out in the clouds, nearly to the steamstalk when the wind picks up and snowflakes flutter past us.

"It's snowing!" Kaz says, a real treat for us since it hardly ever snows in the city. Maybe this trip wasn't such a waste after all. I've impressed Kaz at least, maybe even enough to earn a nice, moist kiss. I pull her close to enjoy a romantic moment, and tilt my head up to catch a large flake on the tip of my tongue. It tastes like salt and doesn't melt in my mouth, just moistens like newspaper left out in the rain. I spit it out.

"That's not snow," I say, scraping the gunk off my tongue with my teeth.

Jack catches a piece in his hand and examines it. "Dandruff," he declares. And then the smell hits us. We all turn our heads up and stare straight into the face of an angry giant dressed in tattered rags and worn brown boots with frayed laces. He's got a serious case of bed head, and as far as I can tell, he must be allergic to personal hygiene.

I expect him to say something profound, something giant-like, but he scowls with eyes as big and fiery as the sun and says, "You wee little shits destroyed my dinner!" We all scramble to the vine, but the giant reaches down, swoops us up into his palm, and brings us level with his face.

"Three eggs you destroyed. And there's three of you," bellows the giant in his deep, grinding voice. The halitosis plows into me like a head on collision with a train. "I'd call that a fair trade. Curried wee-people is one of my favorites."

Then his fingers wrap us into a tight fist, and my stomach slips all the way to my feet by the time he's carried us back to the house and stuffs us into a spice jar half-full of curry. He sticks the cork lid on, then gives the jar a shake. We go flying like turds in upturned kitty litter, the three of us, coated all over in golden dust. I cough out the burn in my lungs as I try to find my footing. Outside our glass cage, the giant lights his stove, pulls down his frying pan, and sticks it on the single burner – every move so tooth-achingly slow that I've got all the time in the world to watch my life



flash before my eyes. As the frying pan heats, the giant takes a cookbook from a sparse, built-in shelf and sits down at his table.

I hear the grating of rocks behind me, and I turn to see Kaz's stone-cold self, boulders rising from her flesh, fists becoming balls of rugged igneous, bits of pebbles dancing across her skin like trained fleas. I gasp. Yeah, I'd seen her stoned-out before, but never like this. I slink out of her way, and watch as she whacks at the glass, hands like sledgehammers, but the glass is at least a foot thick, and Kaz only succeeds in scratching the surface.

And then she starts crying, tears leaving beautiful blue-black streaks down the gray slate of her cheeks. I put my arm around her. "Jack will figure a way out of this," I say to her. "He always has great ideas."

Jack's sitting cross-legged on a mound of curry, deep in thought. I sit next to him, eagerly waiting for inspiration to strike him. I look up at the cork stopper looming above, then nudge Jack.

"Maybe we could build some sort of harpoon," I say, shoving my hands deep into my pockets. There're just my keys, a few coins, and a gum wrapper, but I've seen Jack do more with less. "And we could tie our clothes together to make rope, or—"

"It's too high," Jack spits. I've never heard him so defeated.

"Maybe, but we at least have to try!"

There's an itch between my shoulder blades that makes itself known, an itch I'd nearly forgotten about. I shed my t-shirt and wriggle out of my too-tight undershirt as well. I reach around as best as I can and peel my sweat-drenched wings from my back. They trill as I flutter them dry, such frail, wimpy little things – partly from watered down genes, but mainly because I've kept them hidden all these years. I feel myself flush as Jack stares in awe, and I wonder if he'll still want to be best friends if we do manage to get out of here alive.

I flap so hard, my winglets buzz, but it's not nearly enough to get me off the pile of curry dust.

"Care to give me a launch?" I say to Kaz. She's dumbfounded, but agrees and tosses me nearly to the ceiling of the jar. I catch myself midair, slowly sinking back down, but I fight hard for me and Jack and Kaz and soon my arms are pressed up against the cork roof. I push, push hard for all of us. I'll never be as smart or as brave as Jack, or as strong as Kaz, and even though I've got the upper body strength of a pixie, I've got the heart of one, too. Heat rises all the way to my wingtips, and I catch a glimpse of

myself in the glass, skin shimmering from head to toe. The lid begins to budge, then gives a bit, then pops loose, just enough for me to slip out.

"I'll get you out of here," I say, then look over at the giant, who's still flipping through recipes. Quietly, I flutter down to the ground, and then run across the expanse of floor until I'm right under his chair. With all my might, I tug at the frayed edges of his shoelaces until they slip from their poorly tied knot and are long enough for me to loop together into a knot of my own. When I finish, I make a run for the door, whooping and hollering and beating the floor so he'll see me, but it's not working. I'm just not loud enough for the giant to hear, so I run back to the goose cage and yank on a feather in her sensitive area. She squawks bloody murder, and the giant looks my way, sees me, then lumbers to his feet.

"Another wee-people?" he says. "Four is better than three!" And then he takes a step to chase after me and his shoelaces catch, and suddenly he's falling like timber right towards me. There's no time to go right or left, and I certainly can't outrun him, so I do the only thing I can and jump down into the crack between the wood flooring and try not to get smashed. My whole body rattles, and my brain nearly scrambles, but I don't have the luxury of worrying about myself. I've got to go back and save Kaz and Jack.

I follow the walls of the floor planks blindly until I'm out from beneath the giant. Topside, I see the fallen giant among a shower of feathers, and that poor goose's cage smashed to bits. The aged rafters above creak angrily from the crash. I shake my head and find my bearings, then make my way towards the stove. My heart sinks when I see the jar of curry shattered on the ground. "Kaz! Jack!" I run for what seems like a mile before I finally reach the mound of yellow dust. I dig through, searching, feeling, with tears streaming from my eyes. I feel a leg and pull. It's Kaz, groggy, but alive.

"Troll defenses," she says. "A little fall like that won't hurt rock essence." And she's right. But Jack, Jack's just flesh and blood. Together we search for him, and Kaz pulls him out, his body limp in her massive arms.

"He's still breathing," Kaz says. "Barely."

"Oh, Jack, look what you've done this time," I say. We run past the giant, Jack flopping around like a rag doll draped over Kaz's shoulder.

"Just you wait!" the giant bellows, just now getting up to his knees, but we're out of there, quick fast and in a hurry before he can slip out of his boots. Clouds cling to my feet as I sprint across the surface, but we don't have time to tread carefully. The giant swings his door open, yelling and

swearing and cursing at us. He slams the door behind him. The shack trembles, then leans a little further to the side. The giant turns back at the sound of moaning wood. He throws his hands up to his head as the shack begins to collapse into itself.

We hustle back down the steamstalk and emerge from beneath the cloud just in time to see a thousand pieces of rotten wood raining down. The giant follows, his shrill scream running the entire length of my spine.

They say his impact caused a city-wide blackout, and all the windows in a three-mile radius shattered. I don't remember any of that. I just remember the ambulance ride with Jack looking real, real bad, and the paramedics going on about broken this and punctured that, and how he was lucky to be breathing at all.

And I'm by his side when he wakes up, still hooked to a dozen machines with tubes going in and out of him like he's one of his own robominations. "Hey, Gannon," he rasps, and I say to him, I say, "Hey, Jack, wanna see something real special?" and of course he says yeah, because he's been in an induced coma for two days, trapped inside his own mind. So I open my wallet and pull out a bunch of hundred dollar bills and I give him half, because we'd promised to split our riches fifty-fifty, though Kaz had already demanded more than her own fair share.

"What's this for?" Jack asks.

I tell him all about how that goose had gotten away in the commotion, and that it had flown right down, nearly landed on Kaz after the ambulance had taken me and him to the hospital. She'd sold that bird to an omletry for a hefty but fair sum plus free omelets for life. Jack tells me the thought of goose eggs makes him a little queasy, and I say, "Yeah, me too," then I tell him to hurry up and feel better so we can go back to the Everglens and pluck wings off of fairies before they decide to turn the forest into condos, and Jack says, "Maybe we shouldn't, because wings come in handy sometimes." Then we both sit quiet for a while, before Jack tells me that he's got an idea for a new robomination, and I listen to his delusions because that's what best friends do.

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